George Quinn – South Australia’s First Chief Horticulturalist

George Quinn played a key role developing South Australia’s horticulture industries during the early 1900s. Strategies he put in place would have significant impacts on horticulturalists through until the 1950s.

Born in 1868, he first joined the SA public service on 27 December 1887 initially at Botanic Gardens. On 30 July 1894 he was appointed as an Inspector under the *Vine, Fruit & Vegetable Protection Act 1885* (in what was known as the Wine, Butter and Produce Department at that time) and an Inspector under *The Foul Brood among Bees Act- 1887*.

In 1905 he was assigned to the position of Horticultural Instructor. This included supervising a team of regional inspectors, and establishing experimental orchards at Hackney, Blackwood, Berri and part of Kybybolite. These provided a repository for collection and screening of fruit tree varieties, developing new fruit production techniques, and evaluating new crops (eg cotton at Berri in early 1920s). Over the years he acquired additional responsibilities for administering quarantine and export produce, fertilizer, chemical, hay and chaff, and seed analysis legislation.

George Quinn was in a highly influential position. He was effectively Deputy Director of the Agriculture Department under Arthur Perkins, the Director from 1914 to 1936. The role he developed formed the template for the Chief Horticulturalist, a position that was in place until regionalisation of the Department between 1977 and 1979.

George Quinn was a prolific author, producing over 40 detailed Bulletins and Journal of Agriculture articles on a wide range of horticultural topics, including industry development, pest, diseases and post harvest matters.

He is probably best known nationally for his expert knowledge on fruit tree pruning, producing an initial leaflet on pruning in about 1900. This was gradually developed into a 268 page book with 13 editions being published. The final version of “Fruit tree and grapevine pruning: a handbook for fruit and vine growers: working under the climatic and economic conditions prevailing in temperate Australia” was published by Robertson & Mullins (Melbourne) in 1947. This text was acknowledged and used nationally for many years.

Quinn’s vision identified South Australia as having a natural competitive advantage for development of the almond, citrus, dried fruit, protected tomato and olive industries, and each of these emerged as being significant industries in the state over the next century. He played a key role in developing new horticulture production districts, especially the Riverland, where he was one of the first to identify the impact of salt on irrigated horticulture crops. He was a strong advocate of irrigation to obtain better and more reliable yields from horticultural crops.

George Quinn ran numerous pruning demonstrations across the state, and established pruning competitions in many districts to improve pruning skills of horticulturalists.


George Quinn demonstrating fruit tree pruning techniques – 1918.
Source: State Library of SA image 280/1/10/432

George Quinn’s strong interest in entomology was valuable in developing strategies for the management of early outbreaks of Codlin moth. These strategies assisted South Australia’s apple industry to expand exports to the UK and Europe in the 1905 to 1910 period. He also set up fruit packing competitions for the apple industry during this boom export period.

Fruit fly emerged as a major horticultural pest in WA and Queensland around 1897, and posed a significant threat for SA fruit growers. In 1907, Quinn used his entomology knowledge to devise strategies for control of fruit fly should an outbreak occur in South Australia. These strategies provided the blueprint for managing SA’s first fruit fly outbreak in 1947, and formed the framework for today’s fruit fly management programs.

Quinn was a keen educator. Not only did he deliver many lectures, demonstrations and talks to Bureau of Agriculture groups and horticulture industry meetings, but he was a strong advocate of the School of Mines as a venue for skilling both industry and service personnel. He regularly lectured on horticulture topics at the School of Mines, continuing to do this after his retirement from the Department of Agriculture.

He also played a key role in the introduction of seed testing services from 1910 onwards. Although focused initially on quarantine aspects of seed imports, the service began providing certification services for pasture seeds from 1935 onwards.

George Quinn retired from the Department of Agriculture on 18 May 1935 (The Advertiser 20 May1935, P10)after 47 years of public service, and died on 1 January 1943 (Chronicle7 January 1943, P5). His two sons also went on to have successful careers working with horticultural industries in South Australia and Victoria.

Prepared by Barry Philp December 2017